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## THE PHYSIOLOGY OF POLITICS

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS, SIXTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE  
AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

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Our organization is known as the Political Science Association, and yet the subject to which it is devoted lacks the first essential of a modern science—a nomenclature incomprehensible to educated men. Other sciences employ terms of art which are exact because barbarous, that is remote from common usage, and therefore devoid of the connotations which give to language its richness and at the same time an absence of precision. But the want of an exact terminology is not the only defect of our subject. It suffers also from imperfect development of the means of self-expansion. The natural sciences grow by segmentation, each division, like the severed fragments of an earthworm, having a vitality of its own. Thus in zoölogy and botany we hear of cytology, histology, morphology and physiology, expressions which correspond, perhaps, with aspects of our own ancient, yet infantile, branch of learning.

The first of the divisions already mentioned, cytology, deals with the cell as the unit of structure, and bears thus an analogy to the study of man as an individual, a social being by nature, no doubt, but considered from this point of view as a separate

personality; to some extent at least as an end in himself. It corresponds rather to psychology than politics. Histology, if I am correctly informed, is concerned with the tissues made by the organic connection of many cells, the substances of which the body is formed, and by means of which its manifold operations are conducted. We may fancy that it has its counterpart in sociology, that science of which the late Gabriel Tarde remarked that it was named before its birth, although the time had come when it ought to be born. Morphology deals with the structure of an animal or plant as a whole, with the organs by which it lives or moves, and the forms which they assume in different species. It corresponds in our subject to a study of the structure of the state or municipality; the constitution of the government; the executive, legislative and judicial organs; and the diverse forms which they assume in various countries. It is the least difficult portion of political science, because the facts can be ascertained and studied with comparative ease and accuracy. For the most part they are contained in authoritative documents, and in any case they are fairly obvious. They force themselves upon our notice, and compel attention. This branch of our science has, indeed, received far more consideration than any other; but although it must be the basis for all knowledge of government, and must be mastered before we can proceed farther, it gives us after all only the framework of the subject.

Finally, physiology treats of the functions of the various organs. If the term be applied in politics we must bear in mind that it means not the functions which the organs are intended, or supposed, to perform, but those which they actually do perform; and unfortunately for the patient inquirer that is by no means the same thing. Moreover we must include pathology, or the study of disease as well as of health, for governments are rarely, if ever, wholly sound. Now the object of this address is to urge a more thorough investigation of the physiology of politics, by pointing out its necessity at the present day, some of the methods that may be employed, and the results that can be obtained.

To advocate in this twentieth century the importance of studying the actual working of government may seem like watering

a garden in the midst of rain. But that this is not the case everyone must be aware who is familiar with current political literature on such living topics as proportional representation, the referendum and initiative, and the reform of municipal government. These discussions are for the most part conducted in the air. They are theoretical, treating mainly of what ought to happen, rather than what actually occurs; and even when they condescend to deal with facts it is usually on a limited scale with very superficial attention to the conditions under which the facts took place. The waste of precious efforts at reform, from a failure to grasp the actual forces at work, is indeed one of the melancholy chapters in our history. Earnest men, overflowing with public spirit, sometimes remind one of a woodpecker in Cambridge, some years ago, who strove loudly for an entire forenoon to drill a hole in a copper gutter. Reformers are prone to imagine that a new device will work as they intend it to work, and are disappointed that it does not do so. They are far too apt to assume that if their panacea be adopted mankind will become regenerate; whereas the only fair supposition is that men will remain under any system essentially what they are—a few good, a few bad, and the mass indifferent to matters that do not touch their personal interests. All reform movements need for criticism a devil's advocate, who is not, however, believed to be in league with the devil; or rather they need advice from people who are really familiar with the actual working of many political institutions. In short, they need men with a scientific knowledge of the physiology of politics.

We are all familiar with cases where forms of government have been imitated without the corresponding functions; where institutions have been copied under conditions in which they could not produce the same effects as at home. A well-known example of this is the attempt of other European countries to adopt the English parliamentary system. The system has yielded in new lands results of varying merit; but it has not worked as it does in England, because the environment which determined the real functions of the organs of government could not be reproduced. Yet this was not at first perceived; and although that

particular fact has since become so well known as to be a commonplace, there is no good reason to assume that we have outgrown the blindness of those days. We are ever hearing men extol the virtues of some foreign political contrivance, without observing, often without stopping to inquire, what its actual mode of operation may be, or whether the functions of the organs at work may not in reality be quite different from what they appear. We hear much of the excellence of municipal government abroad, but how much have we heard about the real causes of that excellence,—how far they are due to the municipal bodies created by statute, and how far to agencies less visible, but in fact more potent? Professor Munro has recently told us a good deal on that subject, and it is one of great importance.

One useful test of the success of investigators in any branch of learning is the extent to which people engaged in the practice of the subject turn to them for advice. If men employed in the construction of engineering works paid little heed to the discoveries and opinions of professors of applied science, or did not care to employ their pupils, would it not prove that those professors were off the track, or that their science was still in its infancy? Conversely, does not the rapidly growing respect of the public for bacterial analysis show that medicine has reached a far higher degree of maturity than ever before? But how much do statesmen turn to professors of political science for guidance? Surely, students of politics do not lead public thought as much as they ought to do; and is not this largely because they are regarded as theoretical; because, in other words, they do not study enough the actual working of government?

The prejudice is still so strong that men in active public life tend to disregard suggestions from academic sources even when based upon a study of results. Members of the Senate committee that framed the act for the government of Porto Rico were warned that the system they proposed to set up had led to sharp dissensions between the elected legislature and the appointed governor, both in the American colonies of Great Britain before the Revolution, and later in Canada, Jamaica and Malta. They were informed that the system had been almost entirely abandoned

by the British colonial office as unsatisfactory, and that in its stead either responsible self-government had been granted, or the power of the elected members of the legislature had been curtailed. Nevertheless, the system was adopted by congress. It produced the results which English experience had foreshadowed, until at last conditions became so acute that last summer the Porto Rican act was amended by conferring upon the governor authority, in case of a deadlock, to renew the appropriations of the preceding year without the consent of the assembly.

The subject of direct primaries is a burning one at the present moment, and one in which the practical operation of a principle is of vital consequence. Yet when legislators inquire concerning it our political students, while fertile with suggestion about the way it ought to work, are almost dumb about its effect in practice. Professor Merriam has recently written an excellent book upon the movement,<sup>1</sup> marked by great knowledge of its history, and, what is far more rare, by admirable impartiality; but of one hundred and seventy-eight pages of text only sixteen are devoted to actual results. The fact is that opinion on the question of the direct primary is in a strange state of chaos. The campaign for its adoption in New York is in full cry, at the very time that it has been abolished in Boston as a failure. In that city a popular vote was held last November to determine whether the citizens preferred to return to the old nominating convention, or to adopt nomination by petition alone without party designations or the official ballot at the election, and the latter was carried by a small majority. The alternative was put in this form because substantially everyone, including the leading politicians of both parties and reformers, agreed that either system was better than the method of direct primaries which has been tried for several years. Can there be any doubt that we need to know more than we do of the actual results of that method of nomination, and how far they vary under different conditions, in order that we may learn, not from theoretical argument, but from careful observation, to what class of communities it can be wisely applied? The labor

<sup>1</sup> "Primary Elections," Prof. C. Edward Merriam, University of Chicago Press, 1908.

of gleaning such information is incumbent upon students of political science, and until we perform duties of this kind with scientific thoroughness we cannot expect our profession to gain the ears of public men.

Surely, enough has been said to point out the need at the present day of a greater study of the physiology of politics. If scientific methods are to have any considerable influence on public affairs in this country: if American scholarship is to achieve any marked advance in political science; it would seem to be essential that our Association should encourage more extensive research in political phenomena from this point of view.

Let us not imagine that such research is easy. On the contrary, the difficulty of ascertaining the truth renders the physiology of politics more laborious than any other branch of our subject. It requires the collection of a vast mass of facts, much of which will prove to be redundant or unimportant. It requires the balancing of much evidence, sometimes given by people only dimly aware of the motives of their own conduct, or, indeed, of what their conduct really is. Men in public life are often far less free to act as they please than they themselves suppose, and their generalizations from their experience, though perfectly honest, are often misleading. Therefore it is needful to distinguish carefully between their opinions and their statements of fact, and to observe how far these last come within their own personal knowledge. Accurate induction is as rare in public life as elsewhere.

Another thing for which one must be on one's guard is the existence of shams. Someone will hereafter write a most interesting book on the utility of shams in government. They perform a function in politics not unlike that of fictions in law. They are a means whereby political institutions grow, surmounting rigid obstacles which they cannot destroy. Everyone knows that the selection of the president of the United States by the electoral college is a sham, and it took very little time to find that out. But it took a long time to discover that the cabinet in England, by a silent extension of its functions, persisted in creating shams, until the literary theory of the constitution, as it has been called,

ceased to present anything like a true picture of the British government. No doubt we are equally blind to what is going on under our eyes today. We are liable to be misled by the fact that structure is written and evident, while a function which has not been studied and described can be found in no book, and is in its nature intangible. We are in danger of being misled also by the fact that most shams are to some extent deliberately maintained. It is often for the interest of the persons directly concerned to conceal the sham, and not seldom they deceive themselves into believing things more real than they are. Still, with keen insight, no great amount of probing is required in any government to find shams, for they are prevalent everywhere. But after we have found them we must solve the far more difficult problem of determining the exact degree of unreality.

In a study of the physiology of politics we are limited by the impossibility of experiment. Politics is an observational, not an experimental, science; and hence the greater need of careful observation of those phenomena which we can use. Now accurate and penetrating observation is not a common quality, and one is sometimes grieved by its absence in a political writer. It can, of course, be very largely trained, but is it not true that we pay far less attention to it than we ought in the instruction of students in our universities? We lecture to them, and make them write theses, compiled in most cases wholly from books or other documentary material; but we do not teach them enough to use their own eyes on the currents of public life that are continually ebbing and flowing around them.

Moreover, we are apt to err in regard to the things to be observed. We are inclined to regard a library as the laboratory of political science, the storehouse of original sources, the collection of ultimate material. To some extent this is true. The debates of legislative bodies, the votes cast, the statutes enacted, the platforms of political parties, the results of elections, and many other things, are in certain aspects primary phenomena. But for most purposes books are no more original sources for the physiology of politics than they are for geology or astronomy. The main laboratory for the actual working of political institutions is not



a library, but the outside world of public life. It is there that the phenomena must be sought. It is there that they must be observed at first hand. It is by studying them there that the greatest contributions to the science may be expected.

The difficulty would seem to be based upon an unconscious confusion in regard to the nature of authority; for there is still a strong tendency in our subject to rely upon the authority of writers instead of investigating the facts themselves. The habit still prevails of referring to, and often of accepting as final, everything printed in a book, and especially in a monograph, without a careful examination of the sources from which the writer derived his conclusions, and the accuracy or sound judgment shown in his observation. We are too prone to regard a bibliography as a complete catalogue of sources, and to judge a writer's knowledge by the copiousness of his footnotes. Too often statements are repeated in book after book without any serious attempt at verification. All of us can probably recall examples of this kind. One that comes to my mind is that of the liberal party organisation in England, which, under the name of the caucus, was long a terror to conservative people. Descriptions of its dire control of political action were copied by one writer from another, without observing that what was portrayed by the earlier as a menace was stated by the latter as a fact, or that the caucus itself had in reality developed into a far less formidable agency than its friends had hoped or its opponents had feared. Too much political writing, that passes for original work, is based, like Tomlinson's confession of sin, not on personal knowledge, but on what has been read in a book.

Granting that the main laboratory for the study of the actual working of politics is the real world of public life, we are only at the threshold of our problem; for the observation of political phenomena is no simple matter. Every action is the resultant of many forces which cannot be isolated, and hence is capable of being explained in different ways. In seeking to interpret complex affairs a great deal will depend on the point of view from which we approach them. Many years ago two young friends of mine made at the same time, but quite independently, an exam-

ination of the speed of railroad trains in various countries. Both sought to account for the fact, strongly marked in those days, that the maximum speed in England was far greater than in America. One of them, college bred, attributed the result to the more democratic character of our people; while the other, trained in a school of engineering, ascribed it to the American practice of using coupled driving wheels. It is of no consequence for our purpose here that they were both wrong; that without abandoning either democratic tendencies or coupled driving wheels the speed of our best trains is now close to the maximum in England. The important thing for us is that each of these men observed what his previous training had prepared him to see. One of them was impressed by the social, the other by the mechanical, aspects of the problem.

The principle illustrated by this case is of universal application, and is particularly true of a matter so intricate as political observation. We see what we look for, and it is therefore essential that we should look for everything with very open eyes. In short, the observer of political phenomena requires a wide knowledge of a multitude of diverse conditions, and, what is more important still, a sympathetic imagination. He must be able to put himself in the place of all sorts and conditions of men, thinking as they do, and thus appreciating the reasons for their conduct. Above all he must instinctively conceive himself in the position of a man in public life, and feel the motives that press upon him from all sides. Only in that way will he learn the hidden springs of action, and have a keen perception of political forces, or, indeed, of the facts themselves which appear so plain when they have once been seen.

But imagination is stimulated by experience, and hence a student of politics derives incalculable benefit from a personal familiarity with public life, even on a small scale. He will learn much from service in a city council, a school committee, a minor office or a party organization, and it is a happy augury for our science that so many of its younger votaries are taking an active part in public affairs of some kind. There is no such chastening for crude conceptions as rough contact with the world, and any

attempt to work in a complicated organization teaches why simple characters may follow tortuous paths.

Nor is it in public bodies alone that experience may be gained. A great deal may be learned from a candid observation of clubs, associations, organizations and institutions of all kinds, their mode of operation and the forces that control them. Many good people stand aghast at methods in public life which they commonly employ themselves in more private affairs. Of course I do not mean methods that are in any way corrupt; but they rail at a political machine of any kind, when they are in fact conducting with great complacency a little machine of their own in some society. They regard as abnormal in politics a mode of conducting business which they adopt naturally in carrying on a club, or even a reform movement; and therefore they fail to distinguish the things that are inevitable and legitimate in party organization, from those which are reprehensible and should be opposed by all good citizens. Everyone in this land of ours belongs to associations, public, commercial, social or philanthropic, and if he will submit his own conduct, and that of his colleagues, to a searching analysis he will acquire no little knowledge about man as a political animal. Sometimes politics are not as active or heated in a state central committee as in a sewing-circle.

Besides the direct observation of political phenomena which calls the philosopher out of his study to mix with men, there is the use of statistics, proverbially deceptive but ever more needed in political research. Statistics, like veal pies, are good if you know the person that made them, and are sure of the ingredients. By themselves they are strangely likely to mislead, because unless the subject is understood in all its bearings some element can easily be left out of account which wholly falsifies the result. The late Francis A. Walker, prince of statisticians, found that in collecting figures for the census, the inmates of an inebriate asylum had been reported as all temperate; a fact no doubt true at the moment, but calculated to give an incorrect impression of the degree of sobriety in the state. The more complex the phenomena to be studied, the greater the care that must be used in accepting the conclusions given by statistics; and yet in political

science they are invaluable, both for discovering new facts and for verifying facts obtained by other means. For this purpose we do not, I think, resort to them enough. We ought to collect them much more freely than we do, and the results obtained from them, and from observation, ought to be used constantly to check one another. The labor of compiling them is no doubt very great, and much of it is of a mechanical character that consumes a distressing amount of time. In this matter our colleagues in the natural sciences have a great advantage over us, for they have well-equipped laboratories with their corps of trained assistants, while the student of politics usually works alone or with little help. Much of the labor involved could be done by any intelligent person with a little training, and I have often thought how much might be achieved even by a small laboratory of political science well organized for a definite branch of research. The bureau of legislation at Madison is of that kind; and the endowment of such a laboratory might open new fields of political knowledge and confer a lasting benefit upon the country.

There are many things we ought to know about the present working of political institutions of which at present we are far too ignorant. To mention only matters that affect our own government; we ought to know far better than we do in what places, and under what conditions political bosses have existed in the United States, and we ought to understand more fully the functions that they actually perform. People—nay students of political science—often talk as if bosses flourished everywhere from the Atlantic to the Pacific; and yet anyone who stops a moment to reflect knows perfectly well that in the greater part of the country there has never been a state boss, while in the places where he has thrived he has usually been intermittent, and in only a few states has he been permanent. Which are these places, and what are the local conditions, that have proved favorable to his rule, and why has there never been a national boss? Again, people speak as if the boss regulated everything with an autocratic sway, prescribing how the party should act on every question that comes before the state legislature, and herding all the members of the party there under his con-

trol. But if so every measure in the legislature would be carried or defeated by a solid vote of the party; whereas in fact statistics prove that strict party votes are uncommon even in most states that enjoy a boss. What then is the exact function of the boss? With what matters does he deal, and how great is his control over the members of the party in regard to them? If we knew these things accurately we should be in a much better position to contrive a remedy.

Connected therewith is the extent of party voting in different public bodies in this country and abroad. If we knew that, we should be able to form a sound opinion on the normal and the unhealthy manifestations of party and the institutions that tend to inflame, or check, its excesses.

To take another matter: What are the classes of voters who change sides, or abstain from voting, at different elections, and in what way is this affected by the Australian ballot, and by direct primaries or other methods of nomination? That is certainly not an unimportant problem, and its solution might well lead to intelligent and effective reforms. It could, no doubt, be answered by a minute comparison of the results of elections in a large number of voting precincts, coupled with a careful study of local conditions and information obtained from men active in ward politics. A laboratory such as I have suggested would make the work not only possible, but by no means a very long task.

Of a kindred nature is the question of the actual result of popular voting, upon constitutional amendments, upon laws under the referendum and initiative, upon municipal charters and other questions? What has been the size of the vote cast; what conditions have affected the result: how far have the people shown themselves in accord with their representatives, and how far constant in their opinions? On this subject enough careful work has been done to teach us something, but our knowledge is by no means so definite as it ought to be.

Take the subject of public hearings by legislative committees, which has received much less attention than it deserves. It is wholly an American device; but little or nothing has been written

about its history, and scarcely anything about its actual operation. In Massachusetts, where it is used very freely, it has had most beneficial results; but Professor Reinsch in his admirable work on American legislatures, tells us that it has not developed great importance elsewhere. Yet in form it exists throughout the country, and is certainly used to some extent. Congressional committees listen to public officers on matters affecting their departments, and give public hearings on measures of general interest like the tariff; while a similar practice is far from uncommon in the state legislatures. An exhaustive inquiry into open hearings by public bodies in the United States would well repay the labor involved, and would, I am convinced, throw a good deal of unexpected light on a number of obscure problems in our political system.

Finally, it would be very instructive to know the customary length of service of public officers in different parts of the country. To illustrate what I mean, the governor of Massachusetts is elected for a single year, but it has become the habit for the republican party, which is normally dominant in the commonwealth, to renominate a victorious candidate, and give him three successive terms. The chief administrative officers of that state, such as the secretary of state, treasurer and attorney general, are also elected annually; but as a rule the incumbents are renominated indefinitely, and in fact they are always reelected even when a democratic governor is chosen. How far does any similar custom prevail elsewhere? To what extent also are appointed officers retained in their posts in our national, state and municipal governments? There is a common impression that a clean sweep is made at every change of administration, at least when it involves a change of party; but there are exceptions, and it would be valuable to know where and why they exist, and what effect they have had. How far is there an approach to a permanent body of high-grade, expert officials anywhere in the country, and has it shown a tendency to increase or diminish during the last thirty years?

Anyone can add to this list many other matters, but those already mentioned are surely enough to show that, in spite of the

incomparable work of Mr. Bryce, and the labors of other scholars, the field for research in the actual working of our government is still immense, and that there is no limit to the scientific and practical value of the harvests to be reaped.

Moreover, the grain in that field is now ripe for reaping. When the democratic wave first swept over the western world thought upon the problems of popular government was of necessity in the main speculative. Nearly a hundred years ago de Tocqueville had indeed the wisdom to seek to discover the first tendencies of democracy by studying them in the country where it had longest endured. But now popular government has certainly lasted long enough to produce many of its normal results, and a vast deal of information may be obtained by observing them with scientific thoroughness and accuracy. That method appears to be the most promising for an advance in political thought. It is more important at the present day than abstract speculation, which has for some time proved singularly barren. We may expect progress in political thought when we have compiled, arranged and classified our data, and this would seem to be the most pressing task before the members of our profession.

Let me say a closing word about the attitude of the student of politics. The ultimate object of political science is moral, that is the improvement of government among men. But the investigator must study it as a science, as a series of phenomena of which he is seeking to discover the causes and effects. He must not set out with a prejudice for or against particular institutions, or, indeed, regard politics from an immediate moral standpoint; for if he does he will almost inevitably be subject to a bias likely to vitiate his observation. It may seem strange to assert that in order to compass an end we must lose sight of it, and yet the human mind is so limited that this is often true. So long as natural phenomena were studied for the purpose of showing their beneficence to man, science made little progress compared with that achieved since they have been examined in a purely objective way; and the result in learning to use the forces of nature to promote human welfare was far less than it has been in these later days. If our pursuit is worthy of the name

of science, the primary object of the student ought to be the search for truth; and not until he has found it by relentless and unbiased observation can he wisely discuss its application to practical affairs. Let no man grieve because the truth he reveals may not seem of direct utility. Truth always reaches its goal at last, although the world may not at once perceive its value. Still less let him fret that he cannot himself give effect to his ideas; that it is not his lot to wield the sickle in the ripened field. Bentham's influence on the course of English public life was not curtailed because he did not sit in parliament, nor was John Stuart Mills' increased thereby; and what was true of Bentham's deductive reasoning is equally true of inductive political science today. It is our province to discover the principles that govern the political relations of mankind, and to teach those principles to the men who will be in a position to give effect to them hereafter.